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“LONDON SOCIETY” AND ITS CRITICS.

BY LADY JEUNE.

IT WAS from no other desire than to give what I still venture to think is a true account of some of the aspects of the most powerful section of Society in London that the paper which I contributed to THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW for May, 1892, was written, and after having run the gauntlet of varied and somewhat keen criticism I do not feel that in any important point that account has been refuted. In matters of opinion I may have been wrong, but as regards facts, I think my position has not been shaken. I do not wish to take part in any prolonged controversy. But there are one or two points which may be noticed, and, with the greatest diffidence, and only in deference to a widely expressed hope that some objections should be answered, I venture again to say a few words on the subject.

That I should be supposed to have selected the American public as the father confessor of English sins has excited the feelings of some of my critics somewhat unnecessarily, for no people are so intimate with our faults and shortcomings as our transatlantic cousins. Lady Frances Balfour piles up a terrible indictment on this score, but she need not make herself unhappy by imagining that for the first time the veil of our transgressions has been uplifted for the edification of the younger branch of the great English-speaking family. The Americans know far more about us than we know of ourselves, and there is no scandal, however small, however visionary, that the American reporter has not sniffed from afar, and retailed for the benefit of his *clientèle*.

London has now become to Americans what Paris was, and they cannot come here in their thousands, going into Society, welcomed and fêted as they are, with many relations and friends

married and settled in England, without being as fully alive to our vices and virtues as we are ourselves. There is a set into which they do not go, in whose very existence they hardly believe, and to which little of what I have written applies, but they probably draw their conclusions from what they see of the set in which it is the successful ambition of many of them to move; and, if I have pointed out the characteristics of that set, I have not, I suspect, done more than enable many Americans to verify what their own observation, or the information of their friends, has already suggested. Indeed, I will admit that one of my reasons for addressing American, rather than English, readers, was to tell them, what, I hope, is thought by not a few in England of that special part of Society, which perhaps appears to them the most admirable, as it certainly is the most conspicuous. If it is the ideal of any of them, let it at any rate be said that there are Englishmen and Englishwomen who are not blind to its faults, and let them not imagine that, if they achieve admission to that glittering circle, they are initiated into all the best life of England.

It is impossible, after what Lady Frances Balfour has said, to refrain from some reference to the influence exercised on Society by the Queen. No English man or woman, whatever his or her political opinions, could hesitate a moment in paying the tribute that is due to a sovereign whose whole life has been devoted to the welfare of her people, and whose example has been one of the purest and noblest in the history of the world; and the contrast between the court of Queen Victoria and that of her predecessors is one of the most striking in English history. The coarseness and dulness of the reigns of the early Georges, culminating in the immorality of that of George IV., were the closing pages of a story that one can dwell on with little satisfaction; and the accession of a Queen who had led the simple, uneventful life of the English girl of those days gave promises which have been more than fulfilled.

The cultivated, though somewhat cold nature of the Prince Consort acted as the best safeguard and support to the warm-hearted, impulsive and generous girl-Queen, and, through the too short wedded life of the two, the Court of England presented as high an ideal of purity of life and highminded purpose as could well be imagined. The blow which struck the country when the

Prince died, and which crushed the stricken wife to the ground, will never be forgotten. During the long years of her mourning and seclusion the love and sympathy of the country have gone out to the Queen in no uncertain voice, and her people have never overlooked or forgotten the fact that, however irksome and at whatever cost to herself, the work of the country and its welfare has never been neglected for a moment, and that, in business and state matters, the Queen has been as vigilant and hard-worked as any of her ministers. The Queen's influence to-day is in many ways greater than during any period of her reign, but not in the same direction. The example of fifty-four years of devotion to her people's welfare has deepened and intensified the hold she has always maintained over their affections, and no one who was fortunate enough to witness the grand procession on her Jubilee day can doubt how deep and lasting is the sentiment of loyalty to the Queen. This feeling is shared in common by noble and peasant, but surely no one can deny that the restraining influence that her presence exercised over Society has practically disappeared.

It is true that in one important particular the power of the Sovereign is as great as ever, namely, in giving her sanction to the formal admittance of persons into Society by allowing them presentation at Court. The exercise of such power, and its jealous retention, is a real safeguard to society, and while administered as it now is, constitutes a tribunal of honor which satisfies every one as to its impartiality and probity. Save, however, in this particular, the individual influence of the Sovereign over Society and its leaders cannot seriously be said to exist to any appreciable extent as a restraining power, and even the criterion of presentation has, in point of exclusiveness, ceased to be critical.

One important change that has taken place is the very large increase in the number of those wishing to be presented, which has more than doubled in the last thirty years. It is well known that the Queen's simple tastes and ways of life always made great state functions less acceptable to her than more homely occupations and amusements; and had she continued to hold Drawing Rooms, it is probable that some attempt would have been made to limit the number of those admitted. Now no restriction exists except of the most elastic character, and if a person is not palpa-

bly objectionable in reputation there is no reason against his being presented at Court. The relaxation of this one rule is sufficient to account for the presence of a very large number of people now in London Society who could not have entered it at all thirty years ago.

The Queen is kept well-informed of the events of the great world, and is said to have a very accurate knowledge of what occurs, but there it ends, and however much she may wish to express her approval or dissatisfaction, she cannot do so in the unmistakable yet quiet manner in which she could signify her opinion of persons and things if she were constantly brought into actual contact with them. None of the pageantry and pomp of the most brilliant court is ever wanting on state occasions in England, but the absence of the Queen and her *entourage* has done more to democratize English society than any of the many causes which have helped to bring about the changes of the last thirty years. The influence of the Queen's private life, while appealing strongly to the country at large, and endearing her to the mass of her people, is much more potent among the masses where the feeling to her is one of deep and chivalrous sentiment, than it is among the various sets of Society who take their cue from others in a more exalted position than themselves, but whom they see and with whom they come in contact occasionally only. It is obvious how little control the Sovereign, as long as she abstains from taking her recognized place in Society, can have over the heterogeneous mass of which it is now composed, and there can be no disloyalty in admitting what must now be indisputable.

While holding a strong opinion on this particular point, one cannot in fairness but admit that it may well be that the sentiment of loyalty and affection to the Queen is in a great measure due to her seclusion from the bustle and strife of public life. It may be that the policy which she has pursued for so many years may be dictated by a sagacious and profound knowledge of her people, who, in her isolation, with its pathetic dignity, see only a sovereign whose life presents an idyllic picture of home and simple pursuits, who, surrounded with all the grandeur and power of a great empire, chooses to work steadily for her people's welfare, never relaxing her thoughtful labors on their behalf.

Mr. Mallock in his article on London Society says that its nucleus still “consists of our old landed families, the most im-

portant of which enjoy 'high titular rank,'” and no doubt this is so. But the nucleus is so small that it is almost submerged by the new elements which it has gathered around it. A large number of the old landed families have suffered so much during the last few years from the effects of agricultural depression and the various financial crises of the same period that, ceasing to direct and control Society as formerly, they have become dependent on the new aristocracy of wealth for their amusements and pleasure. And conscious that competition is impossible, they have shown no want of alacrity in availing themselves of what their new hosts are willing to offer for social recognition.

Mr. Mallock thinks that London, like a university or a public school, is divided into many sets wholly independent of each other. From what I am told I am not quite prepared to assent to his view that a college at least, if not a university, or a public school, does not take its tone from a particular set. But I should have thought it beyond question that in London almost every set, whatever its special cult, looks up to and is influenced by the set led by the acknowledged leaders of Society. In London a large section of Society is interested in knowing who are the friends and intimates, and what are the occupations and pursuits, of the Royal Family, and of the “smartest” (I hope that the *Spectator*, in consideration of the inverted commas, will allow me thus to use the word) people in the “upper ten,” and with none is this interest more intense than with the new democracy of wealth, to whose influence Mr. Mallock ascribes the decadence of Society in these days.

The great increase of commercial wealth and the large number of new families it has brought into existence have undoubtedly largely contributed to the changes we are discussing, but not to so great an extent as to make them entirely responsible, for luxury was not unknown among the aristocracy before the rise of the rich middle class, and there are many great families who are even now suffering from the lavish expenditure of their forefathers, in whose day merchant princes were rare. Nothing has been more faithful, I might say more obsequious, than the imitation by the new families of the life and surroundings of the great families they strive to compete with. Who has not watched with amusement the growth of the family tree, the gradual increase of the pictures of ancestors on the walls, or the establishment of the family piper

in an old Scotch castle now tenanted by some Mincing Lane millionaire. The sideboard groaning with gold and silver plate, the tribe of gorgeous footmen resplendent in gold and red liveries, are only a few of the indications in the houses of our new aristocracy of the slavish way in which they have copied and emulated the example of the older aristocracy in whose footsteps it is their delight to follow. The splendor and outward trappings of wealth and rank, which fitted a class rich with the traditions of the aristocracy of England, and which have always been accepted as part of its rôle, are adopted by its imitators just as the jay in the fable took the discarded feathers of the peacock to decorate himself, in the vain hope of being mistaken for the princely bird which had lost them.

Where there was position and wealth, there was always luxury, and, where it has survived the shock of agricultural and other financial depression, it exists still among the bluest blood in England, and is not the monopoly of the *nouveaux riches* or of the “strangers within our gates.” It is the fashion to talk of the democratic tendencies of this century as quite a novel event in English history. The democratization of Society in England is now more rapid than hitherto, but it should never be forgotten that it is a characteristic of the English aristocracy, as distinguished from that of France, Austria, Spain, and Russia, and, to a less extent of Italy, that it has rested on other foundations than those solely of territorial possessions.

The names of a large number of the English nobility recall those of men who in law or in commerce laid the foundations of families which are now among the oldest and most dignified in England, and, unlike those countries to which I have referred, we have always recognized and accepted any man of commanding ability, whatever his birth or origin, and as a matter of course have admitted him to all the privileges of the social order to which he had raised himself, and to the most perfect equality and intimacy. The aristocracy of the bar, of commerce, and of the sword, has become so welded with our territorial aristocracy that but for the names we cease to remember from whence they came, knowing that by high character, integrity and great ability they fairly won their elevation; and many names of which Englishmen are proudest are those which testify that there is no position so high and honorable that an Englishman of character and talent

may not attain to it, whatever his origin. But we have been also jealous and careful that none but the most worthy should receive the honors and social recognition to which their personal qualities entitle them, and that feeling, though not acting as a universal barrier, has prevented any great abuse of the privilege, except perhaps in the case of political favors. While the lines, however, were so strongly defined, and while a man was rewarded for his individual merit, the women belonging to him rarely if ever shared his good fortune, except as regards his title, their social recognition never following as a right, and only after many years of patient struggle, if ever, did his family rise to the same social position as its head. To quote only two well-known instances, I should say that neither Lady Peel nor Lady Beaconsfield was ever on the same terms of friendly and easy intimacy with the *grandes dames* of the London world as her husband was with every man of whatever high rank or position.

Now the social recognition of the whole family alters the position, and with a clever, bright wife and plenty of money a man may attain to any position of social success in London. His appearance, his past, his capacity, are all immaterial, supposing he has a better-half who knows how to play her cards properly.

Mr. Mallock maintains that some other qualities besides the "gold that gilds" are absolute necessities to insure social success in London, and goes so far as to say it is unattainable without them. I fear I cannot agree with him. No doubt some members of Society owe their entrance into it to their power to charm or amuse, and the power to charm and amuse implies the possession of qualities of various degrees of merit, but always of some distinction. But the great mass of Society owe few of the triumphs they enjoy to their wit, but much to their wine and food, and many a *cordón bleu* lays his head on his pillow every night with the satisfaction of knowing that his master and mistress would never be where they are but for his genius. Intellect, cultivation, refinement, are still the characteristics of certain sets in London, but the largest and most sought after is that whose aims are pleasure, and whose desires are the gratification of the moment.

Perhaps the aristocracy of England have been wiser in their generation than that of some other countries in receiving the newcomers and profiting by their wealth and their willingness to

pay for some sort of social recognition. There is more worldly wisdom in sharing the pleasures provided for us in a more gorgeous and lavish manner than we could afford and accepting the position boldly, than in shrouding ourselves in the lonely grandeur of a ruined and faded past, surrounded by a poverty, which, however satisfactory to our *amour propre*, must be very unsatisfactory in every other particular. We can easily afford to bestow a pitying admiration on the Faubourg St. Germain in its scornful isolation from fashionable Paris and the life which lives and throbs around it, but we are far too philosophical to take that view of life ourselves, and thankfully accept the good things the “ gods provide us,” feeling with shrewd common sense that life need not be wasted in vain regrets after a lost position which is now only a memory.

We are cynically logical also, for we accept the whole situation ; and the few restraining barriers which regulated who could be known and where we would go, have long ago been swept away, and now we go everywhere, Nothing could afford a more edifying sermon on my text than to cast one’s memory back in a large, crowded drawing-room in London, and try to trace step by step the social victory which has crowned the persevering efforts of more than half the people in it to storm the citadel of Society ; to recall the many rebuffs, the cold suspicions, and in many cases the insults and affronts heaped on them by those with whom they strove to be intimate. The reflections can hardly be pleasant to either side, but there can be little doubt as to which side has the advantage.

Mr. Osborne Morgan is very chivalrous in his defence of society, especially of the girl of the nineteenth century, whom he thinks a creature vastly improved by the emancipation of her life and education. He hardly does more than skim the surface in his criticism of my conclusions upon other subjects I touch upon. I can assure him, however, that if I am wrong, my deductions are the result of my own observation and not of any conjugal confidences. I do not for a moment wish to deny that the girl of the present day has a charm and an individuality very attractive in their way, but she is not an ideal English girl, nor do I think, judging from many of the homes that one knows, that the further development of her character in the same direction is desirable, or that the girls of to-day will make as good wives and mothers

as their mothers were. Formerly the early married years of an Englishwoman's life were devoted to the cares and duties of maternity and of the household; her companions were her children, and she lived with them from the time they were old enough to slip her name till they left her for homes of their own. The modern fashionable mother relegates those duties to a governess and nurses, and rids herself, as quickly as may be, of the responsibilities of bearing and of bringing her children up, so that she may participate in the gaiety and freedom which begin in a woman's life in England as soon as she marries. If higher education and mental development had made our Englishwomen what is represented by a very small number only of them, one would thankfully acknowledge the advantage of a system which has placed them all on a higher mental and social level than their ancestors. But the high type of girlhood which Mr. Osborne Morgan and Lady Frances Balfour evidently have in their mind is a rare development, and, indeed, I strongly suspect that my chief difference with them lies in the fact that they are fixing their eyes on one class, and I mine on another.

The set of which I wrote would have no influence outside its own small boundaries if it were not that the leaders of Society patronize it, and thus give it an importance and influence otherwise unattainable. There are other sets in English Society as highly born, more richly cultured, more difficult to enter, but these require some personal charm or gift from those who wish to belong to it. Each member contributes a quota of wit, intellect, beauty, or charm, which in itself constitutes a right to be admitted to the *camaraderie* and intimacy of its *milieu*. Lady Frances Balfour well describes it when she says that "ease and intimacy are the distinguishing marks of the social life of its members, and neither the wealth nor the rank of one's circle is of importance so long as he possesses these gifts; though those who have beauty and wealth to offer can never be of it; and though the portal is open to all, only such as are fitted by these qualities become members of the set, with all that is best and most agreeable in its inner life." But I venture to ask Lady Frances Balfour of what set is she thinking when she thus writes. Is it that in which the leading members read of their balls and concerts in the *Evening Post*, of their dresses and personal charms, described as the attractions of London and Sandown? I cannot well

resort to the last weapon of the speaker and “ name ” names or I think I could illustrate my meaning very abundantly.

About the weaknesses and foibles of society one may laugh and make a jest, but it is from its increasing luxury and love of pleasure that the grave marks of its decadence spring which we cannot perforce ignore. The relaxation of some of the most wholesome rules for its guidance and control are bringing about many serious changes of which at this moment we can hardly guess the danger. I will now venture to notice only two. One, and probably the most dangerous, is the obvious way in which women are losing their control over Society, and with it the respect due to their position from men. The tone of conversation, the stories told in their presence, and the want of deference to them in the behavior of men, are very significant changes. The other I intended to make one of the main points of my former article, and I refer to it again in order to remark that I have not seen any substantial contradiction of it. I mean what I cannot help describing as the mercenary character attaching in an increasing degree to relations otherwise deplorable enough.

I have now said my say. I have not the slightest wish to assume the functions of a censor, or to play the part of a Cassandra. But after all the communications I have received about my article and all I have seen written about it, I cannot help thinking that those best qualified to judge of the matter do not think I was very far from the mark. Perhaps even the unexpected interest my paper excited is a witness to the same thing—*ce n'est que la vérité qui pique*. If so, I can only hope that in the conflict between right and wrong, in which, in our country, the right is never, I believe, permanently or greatly overweighed, my poor words may contribute something to turn the scale.

M. JEUNE.